

**This paper was presented at an Economic Policy Institute symposium on June 15, 1999. The symposium was funded by grants from the United States Department of Labor and the Alfred P. Sloan foundation. Opinions and views in the paper are those expressed by the author and in no way are they to be taken as expressions of support for these particular positions by the Department of Labor, the Alfred P. Sloan foundation, or the Economic Policy Institute.**

**A COMING OF AGE:  
WORK/LIFE AND FLEXIBILITY**

June 15, 1999 Presentation  
Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes  
Boston College Center for Work & Family

The work/life field is coming of age; we have reached our adolescence. As a parent of two teenagers, this metaphor is powerful and meaningful for me. There are three dimensions of the elements of the coming of age concept that I'd like to explore with you:

- First and foremost, adolescence can (and I think should) be a time of celebration. Today, we should spend some time acknowledging and feeling good about the progress made to date in the work/life arena.
- Secondly, it is apparent that adolescence is a time of contradictions, surprises, and upheaval. From one day to the next, there can be rather abrupt changes in perspectives and priorities. The work/life field has re-invented itself at least three times during the past fifteen years Ð moving from work-family to work/life to “healthy work environments” - and yet there is still no consensus about boundaries or even the primary goals of our endeavors (c.f., Barnett, 1999; Friedman and Johnson, 1996).
- Finally, adolescence is also a time of re-calibration. One of the reasons that I love to attend work/life meetings is that our leaders from the business world, labor groups, academia, and government constantly challenge one another with questions such as,

“Where are we going?” “Are we really making an impact?” “Should we be doing something else?”

During the next few minutes, I will outline my perceptions of some of the accomplishments made in the work/life area, some of the existing signs of turmoil and unrest, and the need for re-calibration in response to the unintended consequences of the corporate “family-friendly” model that has emerged in this country.

## **WHAT IS A FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMPANY?**

Today, I’m going to share with you some of the findings of a study that the Boston College Center for Work & Family conducted in partnership with Business Week magazine. This study was conducted two years in a row, 1996 and 1997. I have selected some of the results from the 1997 study which surveyed nearly 12,000 employees from 54 different companies. This was not a representative sample of all the companies in this country; rather, the respondents are among some of the most family-friendly. It is important to keep this in mind as we dig deeper and find out where we still need to grow, even at the leading companies.

Business Week magazine wanted to identify the most “family-friendly” companies in America. The Center for Work & Family was interested in pushing the boundaries about what we consider to be “family-friendly” companies. We should, therefore, start by clarifying some of the key dimensions of a so-called “family-friendly company.” In my opinion, there is general agreement about a few things:

- 1) The most visible signs of family-friendly workplaces -- the policies and programs that are showcased by employers -- are usually considered “necessary but not sufficient”

to create a family-friendly workplace. High percentages of the 54 companies that were competing to be on Business Week's "Most Family Friendly" list reported that they had comprehensive profiles of family-friendly policies and programs. Granted, this list includes many who might be considered "the cream of the crop," but I still feel that it is good news that relatively these companies have developed comparatively extensive supports (Please see appendix.).

- 2) Components of the workplace culture and climate are important. For example, priorities such as valuing diversity, trust in adult behaviors, and valuing output rather than face time, are closely connected to employees' perceptions of a family-friendly workplace. We developed a culture index for the items on the *Business Week* study and found that over one-third (37.9%) of the employees rated their companies as having very supportive work/life cultures. However, even among these leading companies, the majority (53.8%) were assessed as having cultures that were only moderately supportive. Prevailing expectations and attitudes also have a powerful impact on employees work/life experiences. A recent study conducted by the Families and Work Institute in New York confirmed the importance of relationships between employees and their supervisors (Bond et al., 1998). In the Business Week survey, over a third (36.1%) of the employees indicated that their supervisors were very supportive of their companies' work/life policies and programs. A slightly lower percent (31.9%) indicated that their co-workers were very supportive of these initiatives.
- 3) The work/life movement has expanded to embrace many of the characteristics of a so-called "healthy company." It has become clear from the work of Lotte Bailyn,

Paula Rayman and their colleagues at the Radcliffe Public Policy Institute that we can't separate work processes from the concept of a family-friendly workplace.

Work processes themselves can affect the quality of people's lives. If work tasks and the structure of our work lives are toxic, family-friendly programs will be a Band-Aid at best.

## **A TIME OF CELEBRATION**

Have we made some important progress? It is clear that increasing numbers of companies are establishing more extensive work/life policies and programs. In 1996, Hewitt and Associates reported that 86% of the 1,050 employers in their studies offered some type of child care assistance; that was a increase of 20 percentage points from the survey they conducted a mere five years earlier. Similarly, the percentage of employers offering flexible scheduling arrangements had increased from 53% to 68% during that time period (Hewitt Associates, 1996).

A 1998 study conducted by the Families and Work Institute in New York that surveyed a representative sample of over 1,000 businesses found that there are signs of promise, but also indications that lots more work needs to be done. Here are some of the optimistic indicators:

- Over two-thirds (68%) allow employees to periodically change their starting and quitting times (Galinsky & Bond, 1998).

Among the respondents in our Business Week study, approximately 4 of every 10 employees (41.8%) indicated that they can vary their schedules "a great deal" to respond to family matters. However, approximately 1 of every 8 (22.9%) indicated that they couldn't vary their schedules at all or only to a minimal extent. We need to

remember that these employees were working for some of the most family-friendly companies in the country.

- Four-fifths (81%) of the employers in the Families and Work Institute Study allow employees to return to work gradually following childbirth or adoption (Galinsky & Bond, 1998).
- Nearly 9 of 10 (88%) employers let employees take time off so they can participate in school/child care functions (Galinsky and Bond, 1998).

However, despite the fact that today's work/life movement has its roots in dependent care, the percentage of companies that provide assistance for dependent care remains remarkably low. For example:

- Only half (50%) have set up pre-tax accounts that help employees set aside money for child care or elder care expenses (Galinsky and Bond, 1998).
- One-third (36%) provide employees with information that help them locate child care in their communities (Galinsky and Bond, 1998).
- As we might expect, less than 1 of every 10 workplaces either has a child care center at or near the worksite (9%) or helps defray some of the costs of child care (9%) (Galinsky & Bond, 1998).

I'd like to also mention that the Families and Work study examined the relationships between the extent of unionization and companies' profiles of policies and programs. Galinsky and Bond found a relationship between the proportion of the workforce that was unionized and the scope of the "benefits-oriented" policies and programs. For example, in two-fifths (40%) of the companies where at least 30% of the workforce was unionized employers pay the entire premium for family health care insurance. In contrast, only 8%

of the companies without unions offered this level of coverage. This is the “good news” of unions. However, this study found ambiguous and sometimes negative relationships between the percentage of the workforce that was unionized and flexible practices. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, flexibility has become one of the hallmarks of work/life progress. For example, companies with 30% or more unionized workers were less likely to offer part-time work options, gradual return after childbirth, and flexibility moving from full-time to part-time and back again (Galinsky and Bond, 1998).

As we start thinking about re-calibrating work/life, we need to reflect on the reasons for these relationships. Is there something about industries that tend to be unionized that makes flexibility options more difficult? Is there something about the type of work that gets done in unionized work environments that presents challenges to flexibility options? For example, in our Business Week study, employees holding production jobs were less likely than those in other occupations to feel that the culture of their companies was “family-friendly.” Or, is there something about the relationships between management and unions that creates challenges with flexible work options?

Findings such as these would lead some to conclude that our progress has been mixed. When we begin to move from “policies and programs” toward “outcomes” or “impacts,” it becomes more apparent that the work/life field is coming of age, but has not yet reached maturity.

## **QUALITY OF EMPLOYEES' LIVES**

Despite the increase in the number of work/life initiatives, there are indications that American workers are skeptical that the quality of their lives is appreciably better.

For example, a poll conducted by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates in 1997 asked a sample of people whether things were getting better or worse in their lives. On the positive side, a majority of Americans (61%) felt that the economy is getting better. We were split in our opinions about whether the benefits that most employers give to employees are getting better (35% say better and 37% worse). Also, a majority of people felt that predictable things are getting worse, such as health care and crime. But the biggest loser? Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the people polled felt that the time pressures on working families are getting worse, and only 17% say that this situation is getting better.

This poll illustrates that today's working families are feeling increased stress from job demands. These findings challenge the work/life field to dig a bit deeper to understand variables in the work environment that affect employees' perceptions of "family-friendliness" and affect the quality of their lives.

## **TIME AND FLEXIBILITY**

I want to focus in on two factors that affect time pressures: the number of hours employees work and the extent to which employees feel that they have some flexibility concerning when and where they put in those hours. I want to submit to you that flexibility is one of the most important factors that affects employees' assessment of their companies' family-friendliness.

There has been a lot of press lately about overworked Americans. First, let me say that I do think we have some very good documentation that there are objective as well as subjective measures that certain groups of employees are feeling very overworked. Today, however, I want to share with you my belief that the relationships

between work hours and quality of life issues is very complex. Let's take a look at some of the Business Week findings.

- The relationship between the number of hours worked and the extent to which employees enjoy their jobs is not a simple linear relationship. In fact, in comparison to people who work 21-50 hours per week, employees who work fewer than 20 hours per week and those who work more than 50 hours per week were the most likely to report that they enjoyed their work “a great deal” (52.5% and 44.7% respectively).
- The percentage of employees who reported “a great deal” of stress and pressure from their jobs increased with the number of hours worked. For example, whereas only 17.8% of those working 41 - 45 hours per week reported “a great deal” of stress and pressure, 43.1% of those working 51 or more hours felt this level of stress. Of course, it is important to remember that there may be other differences, such as the nature of the work, that mediate this relationship.
- The percentage of employees who indicated that, overall, they were “very satisfied” with their lives was virtually the same for employees who worked over 30 hours per week, with approximately 29% reporting that they were “very satisfied.” However, those who worked for 30 hours or less were even more likely to report this level of satisfaction (37.2% for those working fewer than 20 hours per week and 41.8% for those working 21 - 30 hours per week).
- The likelihood of achieving a “very good” sense of work-family balance decreased as the number of working hours increased. For instance, 44.3% of those working fewer than 20 hours per week indicated that they had “very good” balance; 26.7% of those working 41 - 45 hours per week reported “very good” balance; and 11.7% of those



working 51 hours per week or more felt that their work-family balance was “very good.”

- Similarly, the percentage of employees rating their company as being “very” family-friendly decreased as the number of working hours increased. Less than one-fourth (23.0%) of those working 51+ hours per week felt that their companies were “very” family friendly whereas 31.5% of those working 31 - 40 hours per week gave their companies that assessment.

In the Business Week study, we asked employees several questions related to flexibility. One item queried, “Can you vary your work hours or schedule to respond to family matters?” Using a 5 point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal), 41.8% indicated that they could “a great deal.” However, when we asked employees, “Do you feel comfortable taking time off from work to attend to family matters?” only 26.2% indicated that they felt “a great deal” comfortable.

We combined five different questions from the questionnaire and created a flexibility index, and used this index to explore relationships with different quality of life measures. Consider the following:

- Employees reporting low flexibility were much less likely to indicate that they enjoy their work. Only 19.8% of those in low-flexible situations indicated that they enjoy their jobs “a great deal,” in comparison to 56.5% of those in high-flexible situations.
- Nearly half (47.6%) of the employees in low-flexible situations indicated that they have a great deal of stress and pressure at work, in comparison to 12.0% of employees in high-flexible situations.

- Whereas only 1 of every 10 employees in low-flexible situations (10.7%) indicated that overall they were “very satisfied” with their lives, half (48.3%) of those in high-flexible situations stated that this was the case for them.
- Only 3 of every 200 employees (1.5%) in low-flexible situations reported that they had “very good” work/life balance, in comparison to the 50.7% in high-flexible situations.
- As you would expect, employees who reported that they had little flexibility were more likely to indicate that work had a negative impact on their home lives. For example, one-fifth (21.8) of the employees who were in low-flexible situations reported that work had a “very negative” impact on their home lives, in contrast to the 1.7% of those in the high-flexible situations who felt this negative impact. Perhaps more surprising was the fact that employees who did have a great deal of flexibility felt that work had a positive impact on their family lives. Although only 2.1% of those in low-flexible situations felt that their work had a positive impact on their home life, 42.2% of those in high-flexible situations reported that work had this positive spillover.
- Finally, over half (56.6%) of the employees in the high-flexible situations felt that their companies were “family-friendly,” in contrast to 1.9% of those in the low-flexible situations.

I know we have reviewed a lot of data, but I’d like to stress the power of flexibility and show you that it’s not just working long hours that results in feelings of stress and not having a sense of work/life balance. Rather, being in a job with little or no

flexibility serves to compound dissatisfaction that may be created by working long hours week after week.

If you control for flexibility, we get some very interesting findings. For example, if you look at people who work long hours (50+ per week), you find that nearly two-thirds (61.8%) of those who work in low-flexible situations indicate that they have a great deal of stress. However, this percentage drops to 26.4% for those who work long hours but have the benefit of high-flexible work situations. Similarly, less than 1% (0.8%) of those employees who work long hours and have low-flexible situations report that they have good work-family balance, compared to 35.5% of those who work long hours but are in high-flexible situations. It is clear that flexibility can exert a powerful influence over employees' experiences at both work and at home.

## **RE-CALIBRATION**

What can we learn from these findings?

- We miss a lot by focusing only on programs and policies, as important as they may be. In fact, so much attention has been placed on the development of policies and programs, that some workplaces have found it difficult to re-calibrate their work/life initiatives so that their work environments can be responsive to important issues, such as corporate culture and the nature of work tasks.
- Changes in our work environments are going to require that the concept of “family-friendliness” be expanded. We are going to need new strategies that can help us respond to issues such as increasing job demands and rising expectations for working extraordinary hours.
- Innovative strategies may require new types of relationships between workplaces and

government policies, new types of psychological contracts between employees and employers, and new dynamics between managers and unions.

It would appear that many employees -- even those who work for some of the most family-friendly companies in the country -- would like employers, community organizations, and the government to do more. It is important to note that the majority of respondents to the Business Week survey felt that workplaces, communities, state governments, and the federal government should all be addressing work/life issues.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the re-calibration of the work/life agenda is that we need to come to grips with the limitations of the corporate model that has dominated the dialogue over the past two decades. This will be difficult, in part because much of the leadership has emerged in the corporate arena. Let me suggest a few of the existing limitations:

1. It may be difficult, inefficient, expensive, and in some cases not effective to attempt to address specific types of work/life priorities by offering services and supports at the workplace. For example, providing structure, guidance, and enrichment to school age children during the late afternoon is a challenge for many parents. However, most companies would not find it practical to attempt to design a program at or near the workplace for school age children.
2. Most employees do not work at those relatively few large companies that have made a true commitment to work/life issues. In fact, most employees do not work for large businesses of any kind. Over 4/5ths of our labor force works at workplaces with fewer than 500 employees. It is obviously inappropriate to attempt to transfer the corporate model to these smaller businesses, lock, stock and barrel. But, we need to do something

so that these working families also have access to needed work/life programs and services.

3. There are a number of social institutions other than companies that affect the work/life experiences of working families. Schools are one of the most visible, but there are others that may seem somewhat disconnected to work/life experiences. For example, the accessibility of dependable public transportation can have a significant impact on quality of life issues. Even the most family-friendly companies get to a point where they say, “This issue is really someone else’s responsibility. I am happy to help, but employers cannot address all of the social needs of employees.”

4. Finally, some concerns have been raised about the advisability of having so many of life’s important social supports provided by employers when the employer-employee relationship is, in many situations, fairly short term and, in some cases, tenuous (c.f., Nash, 1991). It doesn’t take too much imagination to think about the compounded stress of an unanticipated lay-off when the employees must simultaneously cope with changes in income, confront self esteem issues, and make transitions in child care arrangements.

I will conclude my remarks by stating that one of the strengths of the work/life field is its ability to match passion and commitment with flexible perspectives. I anticipate that if we have an opportunity to re-convene five years from now, we may be talking about some new and different issues, but we will continue to be engaged in issues that affect the quality of our lives at work and at home.

## REFERENCES

- Bankert, E. and Litchfield, L. (1998) *Business Week's Work and Family Corporate Ranking: An Analysis of the Data*. Chestnut Hill, MA: The Boston College Center for Work & Family.
- Barnett, R. (1999) A new work-life model for the twenty-first century. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*. (562) 143-158.
- Bond, T.; Galinsky, E. and Swanberg, J. (1998) *The National Study of the Changing Workforce*. New York, New York: Families and Work Institute.
- Galinsky, E. and Bond, T. (1998) *The 1998 Business Work-Life Study: A Sourcebook*. New York, New York: Families and Work Institute.
- Hewitt and Associates. (1996) *Work and Family Benefits Provided by Major U.S. Employers in 1996*. Lincolnshire, IL: Hewitt and Associates.
- Friedman, D. and Johnson, A. (1996) *Moving from Programs to Culture Change: The Next Stage for the Corporate Work-Family Agenda*. New York, New York: Families and Work Institute.
- Nash, L.(1990) *Good Intentions Aside: A Manager's Guide to Resolving Ethical Problems*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.